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Outline of Reference Paper On:

BACK TO THE KOLKHOZES

by

Vasily M. Minyailo*

1959 has witnessed a significant tactical retreat by the Soviet authorities in the field of agriculture. After trying energetically for three years to convert the kolkhozes (collective farms) which are the basic units of the Soviet agricultural economy into sovkhoses (state farms), the Soviet leaders have reverted to a "lower" mode of agricultural production. From Khrushchev on down they have justified this step on the grounds that the present technological level of Soviet agriculture makes the "co-existence" of the kolkhoz system with the sovkhoses economically necessary and that this state of affairs is likely to continue for a long time. ("lower")

But the real though unadmitted reason for the official return to the primacy of collective farming seems to be the fact that the sovkhoses simply do not give the farming population enough real incentives to interest them in boosting production, whereas the kolkhozes offer at least some limited incentives. This will not be the first time that the Soviet regime has put production ahead of Marxist theory despite the fact that the return to kolkhozes ill befits the "final, Communist stage of history" which Soviet theoreticians tell us the USSR is now entering.

*Ed. For biographical information on Vasily M. Minyailo see last week's Soviet Affairs Analysis, No. 5, 1959/60

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BACK TO THE KOLKHOZES

by

Vasiliy M. Minyailo

During the years 1954-1957, thousands of the USSR's kolkhozes or collective farms were transformed to sovkhoses or state farms. In each instance this was an important change, since it meant that everything belonging to the farm ceased to be the collective property of the farmers and was transferred to the state, while the farmers themselves became state employees with fixed wages instead of collective owners entitled to a share in the harvest.

In the USSR such changes are embarked upon only after careful consideration and only under the close supervision of the authorities. Nevertheless, during the whole of this period no official information, statistical or other, directly concerning this movement, was published in the USSR. There were only oblique references here and there. For example, an article entitled "The Sovkhoses and their Role in the Development of Agriculture" published in Voprosy Ekonomiki (Questions of Economics), 1957, No. 7, P. 63), described the success achieved by 85 sovkhoses located in the "black earth" zone of the USSR, which had recently been organized on land formerly belonging to "economically weak kolkhozes." On July 3, 1957, Sovetskaya Belorussiya published a statement made at a plenary session of the Belorussian Party Central Committee to the effect that the All-Union Ministry of Agriculture had permitted the organization of 57 sovkhoses in that Soviet republic out of economically weak kolkhozes. There were reports of a similar nature in other Soviet newspapers, e. g., Sovetskaya Litva (Soviet Lithuania), March 13, 1957, and Pravda, December 10, 1957.

The only official statement in the Soviet press directly dealing with the sovkhos question was the following, issued by the Party Central Committee and the Council of Ministers of the USSR as part of an "appeal to workers on sovkhoses:

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Our Party is now taking an entirely correct course in that, as regards the raising of marketable agricultural production, it is concentrating attention upon the sovkhozes, upon consolidating their economy and organization, improving solidly their economic management, and increasing the area of land they hold not only in the virgin lands, but also in other regions where vacant or poorly-worked land is to be found. (Pravda, March 27, 1957).

During the years when the campaign in favor of sovkhozes was flourishing attempts were made to provide a theoretical proof of the superiority of the sovkhoz system:

The Party's concentration upon developing the sovkhozes has important reasons behind it.... In comparison with all other forms of ownership in agriculture, the sovkhozes have a number of most important advantages. They base their activity on the lasting, stable foundation of socialist ownership, by the entire nation (Voprosy Ekonomiki, 1957, No. 27, pp. 58-64).

The Soviet press published various statistical data illustrating this alleged superiority of the sovkhoz system over that of the kolkhozes. On the basis of such data, Khrushchev threw his support behind the campaign in his reports to the Twentieth Party Congress and the December 1958 plenum of the Party Central Committee.

As long as the campaign was still in progress, however, it was impossible to form an accurate idea of the character and extent of the movement for "sovkhozization" of kolkhozes. Only now that the campaign has proved an acknowledged failure has the Soviet press begun to publish more information about it. Particularly significant in this connection is an article by I. Vinnichenko entitled "Everything Leads to This," published in the journal Nash Sovremennik (Our Contemporary), (1959, No. 4). Says Vinnichenko:

The Party has made it clear that the very formulation of the question as to which of the two forms of socialist agriculture is "higher" or more progressive is essentially incorrect, mistaken. The tendency toward accelerated "sovkhozization" of the kolkhozes has also been recognized as profoundly mistaken (P. 179, Ibid.)

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Although the Party Central Committee has made no public acknowledgment of such a "mistake" in its agricultural policy, the publication of this statement by Vinnichenko clearly indicates its tacit concession of the fact that the mistake was made. Articles recently published in other journals (Kommunist, 1959, No. 14 and Molodoi Kommunist, 1959, No. 9) also point to a decision by the Party to abandon its policy of promoting "sovkhozization" of kolkhozes. And the future of the kolkhozes was dealt with in a resolution adopted by the Twenty-First Party Congress at the beginning of 1959, at which Khrushchev not only made an implied admission that the "sovkhozization" of the kolkhozes was a mistake, but even attempted to provide some theoretical justification for the Party's return to its former policy.

In general this complex question, which actually involved a complete breakup of the social and political foundations of the kolkhoz system, has been treated by the Party leadership as a mere problem of revision of theory concerning the viability of various forms of socialist ownership during the present penultimate stage in the development of Communism (The "construction of Communism on a broad front"):

Considering the matter abstractly, one might suppose that in so far as cooperative kolkhoz ownership is a lower form of public ownership, it should gradually but inevitably give way to ownership by the entire nation. Practical experience, however, has shown that this reasoning is false. Such are the dialectics of historical development that the merging of the two forms of ownership is proceeding and will proceed by way of the all-out strengthening and extension of the cooperative-kolkhoz form of ownership (Molodoi Kommunist, 1959, No. 9, P. 17).

Although owing to the continued absence of Soviet statistics on this point, it is still difficult to define the exact nature and extent of the campaign for sovkhozization, indirect data do something to fill the gap. At the December 1958 plenary session of the Party Central Committee (Pravda, December 16, 1958), Khrushchev stated that by the end of that year the Soviet Union possessed 6,000 sovkhozes, embracing 58,000,000 hectares of cultivated land. Since 1953, i. e., before the start of the campaign, there had been 4,857 sovkhozes, working a total area of 18,200,000 hectares* (Narodnoe Khozyaistvo SSSR V 1956 Godu, The National Economy of the USSR in 1956, Moscow, 1957, P. 114). Between 1953 and 1958 the number of sovkhozes fell from 91,200 in 1953 to 78,900 in 1957, i. e. by nearly 14 per cent, and the proportion of kolkhoz lands out of the total area of cultivated land from 84 per cent to 72 per cent (Pravda, October 13, 1957).

*Ed. 1 acre=0.40468 hectares

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The reduction in the number of kolkhozes was partly due to simple amalgamation, but if one bears in mind that on the average each new sovkhos required the absorption of six to eight kolkhozes, and that some kolkhozes were merged with already existing sovkhos, it may be assumed that between 7,000 and 8,000 kolkhozes were transformed into sovkhos and that between 1,700,000 and 1,900,000 kolkhoz families were affected. Thus, between 7,500,000 and 8,000,000 individuals were concerned in the unsuccessful "sovkhosization" campaign.

A campaign on this scale is much more than a mere experiment and implies an actual change in principle; its abandonment in favor of a "lower" form of socialist land ownership is all the more curious coinciding, as it does, with the official transition of the USSR to the stage of "constructing a Communist society on a broad scale."

The most likely explanation for the reversal of policy is that given by Khrushchev at the Twenty-First Party Congress. Referring to the two forms of socialist ownership--the kolkhoz and the state systems-- he said:

One may well ask why at the present stage we are not pushing ahead with their amalgamation, why we are taking the view that cooperative-kolkhoz ownership must be fully developed alongside state ownership. The forms of ownership cannot be changed arbitrarily: they develop on the basis of the laws of economics. They depend upon the character and the level of development of the forces of production. The kolkhoz system fully corresponds to the requirements and the level of development of today's productive forces in rural areas (Pravda, January 28, 1959).

In accordance with this view the resolution adopted by the Party Congress stated:

The kolkhoz-cooperative form of production relations serves and is capable of serving for a long time to come the development of the productive forces in agriculture (Pravda, February 7, 1959).

The transition to the "higher" form of ownership, then, is being held up by the slow rate of development of productive forces, which according to Marxist definitions consist of labor and the tools of production. Consequently,

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one of the factors delaying the transition is apparently labor--i. e. the kolkhozniks.* Confirmation of this may be found in various materials published by the Soviet press,— Vinnichenko's article mentioned above is an especially good example of this:

On the kolkhozes, it was usual not only for the combine driver but for every woman binding the sheaves to make sure that no crops were lost.... But on the sovkhoses... the grain was left to stand in the stacks: after all, people get paid money for baking it over, too.

Here a part is played by the system of payment for labor and by the entire economic system... The people have no prospects, no confidence that their future welfare will depend on their own efforts... And so, whether you try to shake them up or not, you get nowhere: things are just as they were before (Ibid., P. 185).

In contrast to what used to be said a short time ago, the sovkhos system is now frankly acknowledged to be inefficient. According to Vinnichenko, the director of the Yanushev Sovkhoz, Marykin, called the "Sovkhozization" campaign "a terrible mistake due to a lack of understanding of future prospects," that is to say, a failure to grasp the importance of incentives. Vinnichenko cites "many similar opinions by others." In particular, he condemns the sovkhos system of paying the worker according to the amount of work done, as opposed to the kolkhoz system of allotting each kolkhoznik a share of the crop. He declares that "the people have now become literate and that their support can only be counted on by using economic forms which bring profit to both state and workers" (Ibid., P. 188).

It is accordingly obvious that the Party's change of policy has resulted from resistance by the kolkhozniks to attempts to deprive them of their still existing opportunity to dispose as they like of the fruits of their labor. Once more, we are faced with the paradox that, at a stage when Soviet society is supposed to be approaching Communism, the principle of providing material incentives for the worker has again had to be emphasized. It is a clear case of the kind of restitution of bourgeois law in Communist society which is repeatedly attacked by Soviet writers and against which Khrushchev himself fulminated at the Twenty-First Party Congress. But Khrushchev has now resorted to a statement by Lenin applied to an earlier situation:

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* Ed: Kolkhozniks - collective farmers.

Unless the workers are materially interested in the fruits of their labor, it is impossible to increase the country's productive forces, to create a socialist economy or to bring tens of millions of people to Communism (Pravda, January 28, 1959).

It is difficult at the moment to foretell the future Party policy for agriculture. It is quite clear, however, that after having tried to substitute the sovkhos for the kolkhoz system, which had also failed to justify itself, the Party leadership is now finding that the sovkhoses too have their shortcomings. The chronic crisis in Soviet agriculture may well occupy the attention of the November 1959 plenum of the Party Central Committee.

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